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MACAULAY'S ESSAYS AND THE FRESHMAN

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Any person, I presume, who has taught four sections of freshman English for several years, has definite, perhaps dogmatic, ideas as to how the course should be conducted. There is doubtless a best way for each teacher, and each teacher will work out a method that satisfies him. But there is one thing from which we all suffer, and for which an attempted solution can at least do no harm.

There is a general notion prevalent that the study of Macaulay's essays is an indispensable part of the freshman course in English. The theory is that a careful study of Macaulay's style enables one to write themes. As a matter of fact, few college students pay much attention to style, even when the style is, like Macaulay's, as near to a very bad style as a very good style can be, and even when its mechanical construction is as easily analyzed and as easily copied as is Macaulay's. Patiently, wearily, day after day, the instructor points out the merits of variety in paragraph-structure, of balanced sentences, of a judicious intermingling of long and short sentences, of unusual word-order, of vividness and concreteness of detail; and yet he wades through hundreds of murky themes without finding one sentence in which are presented the points that he has stressed.

Is it not true that the Freshman considers his study of Macaulay and his theme-writing two things as widely separated as the poles? Does he really try to imitate the model? All ideas to the contrary, theme-writing is, to the average student, a literary hack-work more deadening than that of Goldsmith and Johnson's early days. Rhetorics sagely remark that the student must write only on such themes as are interesting and familiar to him. But if a subject be assigned, he sits down to write, his only thought being to fill the required number of pages. On the other hand, if

the subject be left to the student's choice, he will spend an hour in thinking of some subject on which he can worthily "compose," and will devote twenty minutes to the actual writing. Happy is the instructor who, in either case, finds a paper that is intelligible and correct, mechanically and grammatically. He need look for no Macaulayesque devices. For the student who can write writes in his own way, equally regardless of his own and of Macaulay's style; while the student who has no style (such a thing is possible) is obviously unable to copy Macaulay's.

A student once remarked to me: "I don't see why we put so much time on the study of Johnson's life and works when nobody in the class has read anything written by him." At that time the statement was startling. But the student was correct. Such a method of procedure is absurd. For Freshmen do not, as a rule, know anything of Johnson. What preparatory schools offer *Rasselas*, *The Lives of the Poets*, and "The Vanity of Human Wishes" in their curriculum? It was once customary for classes in English literature to pore over a textbook and to recite glibly criticisms of books and authors of whom they had no first-hand knowledge. This method obtains no longer. Even preparatory schools are putting as much time as is permissible on the study of at least one work by each writer that is discussed in class. If, then, Macaulay's essays are to continue to furnish the Freshman his mental pabulum, why begin their study before he has had some time to familiarize himself with the author discussed? With such a background the work would become more pleasant and more profitable.

Again, despite the brilliance of Macaulay's style, his essays defeat their purpose, as far as concerns the young reader, by their bounteous allusions. To the scholar the essays are a genuine inspiration. They are a pedantic puzzle to the Freshman. Often-times one will wonder why the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* printed Macaulay's lives of Bunyan, Johnson, and Goldsmith; for an encyclopedia is supposed to confer knowledge gratis—not to hint vaguely at names and events that are themselves in need of explanation. Macaulay's allusions are always singularly apt and illuminating, but the flood of light that they purpose to throw on

the subject becomes to the Freshman a cloud of obscuring darkness. It may be urged that he should have read widely enough to grasp their significance. Still the fact remains that he has not read widely or well.

There is certainly no excuse for a college student's not knowing the historical background of the essays, but one of the disillusionments of my teaching experience has been the discovery that college students know little history and that what little they do know is not easily available. If one has a sense of humor, he will get some pleasure from storing away in his scrapbook Freshmen's explanations of historical references. Two specimens chosen at random from my collection will illustrate. "Titus Oates," declares the first, "refers to the biblical proverb; that is, the sowing of wild oats by the prodigal." The second naively states that "the Parliamentary army was a body of men who governed England during Bunyan's time. They were supposed to be religious, but their creed was atheism." No argument could convince me that these Freshmen were exceptionally ignorant; indeed the ingenuity shown in their answers (which they would have called "stabs") would seem to stamp them as being rather clever! In many other instances, however, to expect from one's students familiarity with the allusions is unjust. Thus while Macaulay refers quite casually to "the greatest poem in the Latin language, indeed the greatest poem in any language," how is the Freshman—how is the teacher—to know that the reference is probably to Lucretius?

The allusions may be dealt with in various ways. Some teachers prefer fully annotated editions of the essays, so that the student by keeping one finger in the notes during the recitation hour may be able to explain any allusion to the teacher's satisfaction. Such *reciting* is harmful. The student knows nothing of his own, and he forgets the editor's explanations in a day. Other editors content themselves with giving the mere text and with explaining where vague allusions may be found. This is the only satisfactory edition for a college class. But often the instructor may decide that an understanding of Macaulay's references is not essential, and may, therefore, center his teaching on the style and the paragraph-structure. The effect is bad. The Freshman, who should be

taught to read carefully, gets his habit of reading carelessly, of skimming for the story, confirmed. If ever one should follow Ruskin's advice and teach students how to read word by word, letter by letter, it should surely be in a freshman class. How can this method be taught if the allusions are slighted?

It seems to me that whenever one passes by a word or phrase whose meaning he does not know and fails to look it up, his will is weakened, his mind is injured. How many freshman minds have Macaulay's essays weakened! For two hours would be required for the average student to familiarize himself with every unfamiliar word in an assignment of five pages of one of the essays. Usually the assignments are much longer than that. It would appear that the Freshman's energy is being misdirected, his time wasted. Since English 1 is a composition course, the time, the thought, the effort should be placed on the writing of themes, not on the acquirement of broad literary information.

And so I should like to see some other essays substituted for those of Macaulay. The tendency of the American college, as well as that of the American critic, is to plant in young minds the idea that all good writing is of the past. Whether or not this is true of fiction, it does seem strange that anyone should claim that Macaulay is the only good essayist. Perhaps no one does claim this; but such, at any rate, is the impression given most Freshmen. There are a dozen writers now living who write with the ease, coherence, force, unity, though perhaps not with the brilliance, of Macaulay. The art of writing introductory, transitional, summarizing, and looking-forward sentences did not die out with him. Paragraphs good enough to satisfy any critic are still being penned. Inversion and transposition, balance and suspense, rhythm and euphony, carefulness of diction, these are to be found in the productions of many writers. Besides all this, the knowledge that good writers are still with us is inspiring; it tends to enliven one's work and to make one thrill with the desire of emulation. A freshman class responds to more modern essays.

There is room for doubt as to what essays should be substituted. If one desires a textbook, or rather a book containing a number of essays, Stevenson's are worth trying. They have all

the snap and vigor of Macaulay's; they are so vital, so interesting, so intimate that one catches the author's enthusiasm even if one may condemn a few of his sentences. To mention living writers whose essays I have occasionally taken up in the classroom might be invidious. But there can be no harm in mentioning the magazines that are helpful. The *Independent* is rapidly coming into pedagogical prominence because of the numerous high schools in which it is being studied; though it should be said that the *Independent* is not, because of its editorial policy, well suited for study in the freshman class. Personally, my classes have derived great benefit from a study of some of the essays in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Forum*, and the *Yale Review*. The difficulty of this study lies in getting a sufficient number of the magazines; but by a skilful juggling of the available copies, I have carried the work on effectively.

By sandwiching a few of these essays between courses of Macaulay (for however strongly we may feel, we are obliged by convention to pay some attention to him), the students read a variety of subjects, subjects which are "timely," subjects of politics, of religion, of economics, of art, as well as of literature. If they are not always able to grasp the entire meaning of the essays, they are at least freed from the notion that *the essay* was always written by famous dead authors who have left no successors; and the allusions which may puzzle them are usually made to current events on which it is a pleasure to get information—not to obscure men of letters, to foreign literatures, or to mythology.

Whatever may be thought of my plan by older and wiser men, it has certainly worked well with me. English 1 has ceased to be a big bore to the students; and since the thought of the classes has been directed almost entirely to the structure of the essays studied (as it should always be), there has been a steady and marked improvement in their themes.